

## East Tennessee State University Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University

---

ETSU Faculty Works

Faculty Works

---

10-19-2017

# Book Review of A New Sense of the Past: The Scholarship of Biono Flavio

Brian Jeffrey Maxson

East Tennessee State University, [maxson@etsu.edu](mailto:maxson@etsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etsu-works>



Part of the [European History Commons](#)

---

### Citation Information

Maxson, Brian Jeffrey. 2017. Book Review of A New Sense of the Past: The Scholarship of Biono Flavio. *The Medieval Review*.  
<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/24067>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETSU Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact [digilib@etsu.edu](mailto:digilib@etsu.edu).

---

# Book Review of A New Sense of the Past: The Scholarship of Biono Flavio

## **Copyright Statement**

This document was published with permission by the editor. It was originally published in [The Medieval Review](#).

# 17.10.19, Mazzocco and Laureys, eds., A New Sense of the Past

---

The Medieval Review 17.10.19

Mazzocco, Angelo, and Marc Laureys, eds. *A New Sense of the Past: The Scholarship of Biondo Flavio (1392–1463). Supplementa Humanistica Lovaniensia*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016. pp. 288. ISBN: 9789462700482 (paperback).

**Reviewed by:**

Brian Jeffrey Maxson  
East Tennessee State University  
[maxson@etsu.edu](mailto:maxson@etsu.edu)

Biondo Flavio was a prolific Italian humanist from Forlì. He had strong connections to Venice, but his career was spent primarily working at the papal curia. His four major works (the *Decades*, *Rome Reborn*, *Italy Illuminated*, and *Rome in Triumph*) influenced writers interested in history, the city of Rome, language, and other related topics during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and even later centuries. Despite--or perhaps because of--his large literary output, until recently only Biondo's minor works existed in modern editions, mostly within Bartolomeo Nogara's *Scritti inediti ed e rari di Biondo Flavio*. The recent focus of scholars on editing and translating the most important humanist texts from the long fifteenth century has been especially kind to Biondo, with the releases of the Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Biondo Flavio leading the way. Critical editions and translations of each of Biondo's major works now either exist or are slated for publication, sometimes by more than one publisher and in more than one modern language. Biondo has also benefitted from the digital age, with a careful, scholarly website dedicated to his life, works, and scholarship managed by Frances Muecke (available at [www.repertoriumblondianum.org](http://www.repertoriumblondianum.org)).

The edited volume here fits into this context of renewed interest. Most of the articles unsurprisingly focus on philological or literary studies of Biondo's four major works. The book begins with Angelo Mazzocco's introduction, which in fact doubles as an introduction to both the book and to Biondo more generally. The contribution includes a short biographical portrait, descriptions of all Biondo's surviving works, as well as a detailed summary of each essay in the volume. Chapter One by Giuseppe Marcellino looks at Biondo's *On the Expressions of Roman Speech*, a work published in 1435 after a debate in Florence over the spoken language in ancient Rome. Marcellino explores the origins of Biondo's proto-modern views on the fluidity and diachronic changes within languages, suggesting that Biondo used Cicero's *Brutus* more than the usually ascribed *Etymologies* by Isidore of Seville. These Ciceronian roots also help explain Biondo's innovative coupling of the decline of Latin letters with the fall of the Roman Empire, which Biondo originally blamed upon the Visigoths, only to later attribute it to the Lombards.

The book then turns to Biondo's *Decades* and his approach to history writing more generally. Fulvio Delle Donne provides new insights into the many writing stages of Biondo's *Decades*. The analysis sheds light on changes within the work's scope and the contexts for these changes. It also includes a previously unpublished appendix featuring a dedication of books 1-11 in 1446. Delle Donne argues that Biondo's work shows his development of the idea that the Roman empire had ended and would not be revived. In its place was a new order that lacked a higher political authority, and into which, perhaps, a new stable order could be established, with the power of the pope and cardinals playing a central role. In the next chapter, Angelo

Mazzocco argues for a sharp difference between the impartial approach that Biondo took to historical writing versus the more partisan narrative offered by Pietro Bembo in his *History of Venice*. Mazzocco explores Biondo's source usage, pointing to his critical analysis of sources, use of oral accounts, and priority given to older and more reliable historical works. Mazzocco's conclusions differ from other recent investigations of Biondo's writings that have argued that Biondo--like other humanist historians--shaped his histories in part to meet current political concerns. Such differences suggest that much work remains to be done to establish scholarly consensus on even the basic aspects of humanist historiography, especially Biondo.

The book includes two new contributions to the study of the *Rome Restored*. Fabio Della Schiava offers more in-depth information than ever before on the manuscript tradition of this work. What he finds is that, unlike in many other writings, Biondo almost certainly published the *Rome Restored* in 1446 and then was largely done with it, a very different practice than he used with either his *Decades* or especially his much-revised *Italy Illuminated*. A likely reason, Della Schiava suggests, was the professional security Biondo enjoyed under Pope Eugenius IV versus the more unstable years after that pontiff's death in 1447. Marc Laureys also looks at the *Rome Restored*, in particular the copy possessed by the imperial agent Johannes Hinderbach. Laureys shows that Hinderbach thoroughly engaged with Biondo's text, but did so primarily in order to extract slivers of information from it. Hinderbach seems to have been especially interested in content related to the processes and specific changes within Rome over time. He also attempted to make his copy easier to consult by suggesting rearrangements in the work's structure and pointing to ways that the content in *Rome Restored* and *Rome in Triumph* complemented each other.

Continuing the book's chronological order through Biondo's major works, the next three essays examine different aspects of Biondo's *Italy Illuminated*. Paolo Pontari focuses on Biondo's geographical and temporal distinctions. For Pontari, Biondo was among the first to conceive of Italy as a coherent entity that was distinct from other parts of Europe. Moreover, Biondo deserves privileged place in the invention of the concept of a "medieval" period. Both these nationalist and periodic concepts complement each other in the *Decades* and the *Italy Illuminated*. Catherine Castner explores the reception of the *Italy Illuminated* in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. After laying out how Biondo's project compared and contrasted with classical models, Castner argues that the differing genres, as well as other factors, led to both different and similar receptions for the *Decades* and the *Italy Illuminated*. Both works enjoyed readership until the seventeenth century, but, while the *Decades* was critiqued on a variety of grounds, these critiques do not seem to have transferred to the very different *Italy Illuminated*. Both works languished during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, before witnessing an uptick in interest over the past few decades. Finally, Jeffrey White unpacks the complicated editorial history of the *Italy Illuminated* during the fifteenth century. White shows that the initial form of the work was created between 1448-50, and then subsequent changes in content occurred between 1450-53, after 1455, between 1458-62, and in the first printed edition of 1474. Particularly interesting are the many ways Biondo repackaged the work in both form and content as his professional situation changed.

The book concludes with an essay on Biondo's final major work, the *Rome in Triumph*. Frances Muecke traces the reception of Biondo's work in both cited and uncited passages in different types of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writings. Through case studies of specific passages Muecke traces content from Biondo's text through many writers into the nineteenth century, sometimes directly from Biondo's writings, and other times second-hand through the works of other writers. A comprehensive bibliography and list of manuscripts for all the essays ends the book.

Taken as a whole, this book offers a welcome sustained examination of the still little studied oeuvre of Biondo Flavio. All of the essays are based upon new research, even as the audience for several essays will undoubtedly be limited to other Biondo specialists. The essays represent strong starting points for future researchers interested in Biondo's works and mid-fifteenth-century humanism. The book does not provide in-depth treatment of Biondo's life, his career, and the many contexts into which he and his works fit, but these areas should also prove fertile soil for future researchers. Unlike even fifteen years ago, this book shows that future studies involving Biondo will be able to make use of a firm textual basis.